

WILL AMERICANS STAND THIS PLAY IN AMERICA?

By Alan Dale.



"The Tree of Knowledge," Which Is Making a Terrific Sensation in London, Deals with Woman as the Destroying Angel of Man, and Outdoes in Realism Anything Yet Put on the Stage.

"There is the Thief!" The great climax in the fourth act of the play.



Mr. Alexander As "Nigil Stanyon."

Julia Neilson As "Belle," the Destroyer.

MAN'S "perfidy" and woman's sweet and trustful gullibility have so long posed as subjects for the modern dramatist—as they have posed for subjects in real life—that it is rather startling to come across a play in which this condition has been audaciously vice-versa'd. Playgoers are so completely accustomed to the sweet woman martyr, whose life has been ruined by the infamous man, that they have come to expect nothing else. In fact, the rules and regulations of every gallant community insist that in all sexual differences, the man must sin and the woman must be sinned against. He must be the tyrant, and she the martyr.

In fact, so thoroughly is this sort of thing understood, that most women are sorry for themselves, and men are in a chronic condition of blushing for their sex. Feminine novelists, quite convinced that a woman is always an angel, minus the wings and the halo, have taken up arms in her defence—arms that she has never needed in the least. Men, when they read novels and see plays to-day, are fully aware of what they have got to expect. They know that their "perfidy" has been dramatized, and that the pathetic element in the dramatization will be the once virginal charms of their feminine victim.

The woman tempted me, and I did eat. That is the oldest problem episode of all. We have progressed so thoroughly, however, that we look upon Adam as a coward, and Eve as rather a nice and feminine person, who was used to shield her husband's weakness. In London, however, an estimable playwright, known as R. C. Carton, has just produced a play at the St. James Theatre, called "The Tree of Knowledge," which has set all London talking. Every journalist is jotting down pros and cons for the new drama, and much of the hubbub that succeeded the presentation of "The Second Mrs. Tangueray" has been aroused.

London can tolerate a great deal. It is, in fact, proverbial for what it will tolerate, as long as the spade is called by some other name, and the idiotic censor has no rude words to cut out. London will, in fact, endure long play-sequences on infidelity, if no strong language is used, or it is alluded to as "firtation." Anything that is yelled for the British matron goes. The London critics are now wondering whether the matron will endure "The Tree of Knowledge"—a play in which perfidy is supplied by the woman and martyrdom by the man—a work in which the tables are turned rather summarily—an effort which aims a blow at the gallantry which has lived so long.

As "The Tree of Knowledge" is on the tapis for presentation in this city, I can't help wondering how New York will take such a "picture." For New York is even more aggressively gallant than London. New York has frequently announced that it had no interest in even the portrayal of a woman's degradation. New York critics call every sotted dove a "precious creature," and ask its wives and sisters to look at something else. Consequently for the benefit of this metropolis, I am going to describe "The Tree of Knowledge" as fully as I can without having seen it.

The play brings back problem-stories once again. We have been "suffering" upon them, you know, more from a sense of duty than from any other idea. We have substituted "dramatic" and have tried to believe that we liked it. We have revelled in absurd costumed creatures, in silks and satins and swords. For human passions we have substituted infantine legends of doughty knights rescuing lovely ladies from high towers. We have Anthony Hope'd ourselves into a sort of contempt for every transaction in hearts that hadn't a good thick wedding ring and bouquets of orange blossoms as diluxes. We have divorced ourselves with a sort of soothing syrup made up of Hans Christian Andersen and the "Arabian Nights"—with plenty of "Mother Goose" thrown in. And we have said—drawing ourselves up to our full height—"The theatre is not the place in which to discuss the vital issues."

Yet the problem play is coming back. It has made its reappearance in London where since "Mrs. Tangueray," "Mrs. Elphinstone," and "John A. Dreams," they have also been rubbing their gums with soothing syrup.

I reiterate my ancient assertion that you cannot keep the problem play from the stage for any projected length of time. As long as men and women are men and women (and you and I had nothing to do with making them so; we can't help it) they will want to see their lives analyzed. Perhaps if we all went through life in silk and satin, and had nothing else to do but rescue high-falootin' damsels from the platinic grasp of some picturesque villain, we should be able to relegate poor humanity to the background. But we go through life rather seriously. We have a rough time of it, on the whole, and the rough time is generally very materially aided by the vital issues that we pretend in Puckishian hypocrisy to loathe.

"The relations of man to woman are of the most important of all the relations of life," says Henry Arthur Jones. "The whole health, and happiness, and vitality of the nation depend upon the adjustment of these relations. But you mustn't indicate this in your plays. Your characters must have no sex! Say this to your dramatists; enforce the narrow prejudices that governed the theatre until a few years ago, and you may have spread all over the country a series of puppet shows, with living marionettes, but you will have no national drama. * * * If this were a perfect world, and we were all perfect men and women, there would be no drama and no religion. But, as the world is not perfect, it is in this strife of good and evil, of right and wrong, that religion and the drama find their element to work."

But, again, I ask, will New York submit to such a problem play as "The Tree of Knowledge," in which there doesn't seem to be any particularly striking lesson (we are always happy when we can countenance immorality under the guise of a lesson) or any very necessary problem?

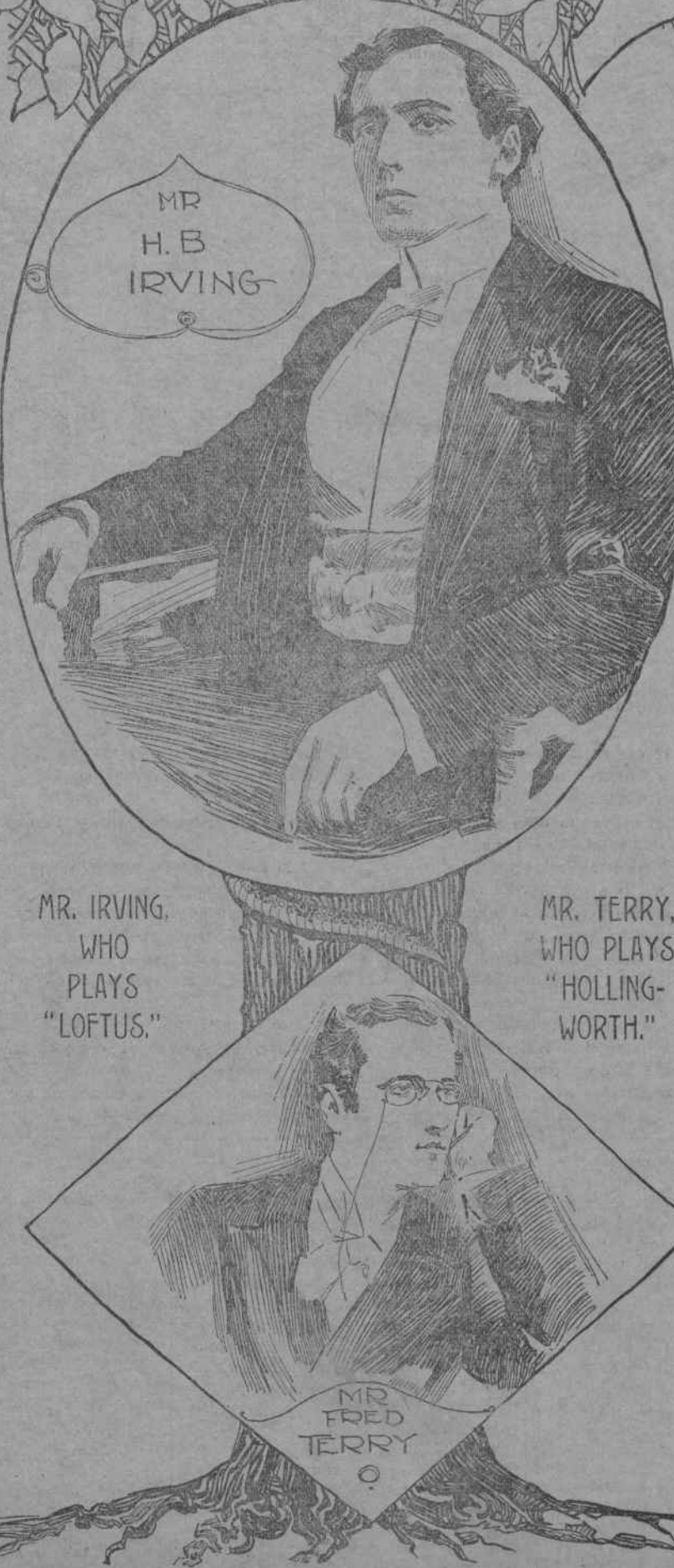
This is the keynote of the play, and it is uttered by Nigil Stanyon, the "hero." The world is hard, and justly hard on the man who is dastard enough to tear from a trusting girl her robe of purity, but surely there is another side of the picture. What of the ruin that women sometimes bring on men? What of the young lad who enters life with a clean heart and healthy brain, but who feels the pulse of manhood throbbing in his veins; say that he falls under the spell of a wanton. A wanton who beckons to him to climb the tree of knowledge, and as she glances down through the dark leaves, points with mocking finger to the foothold in the rotting branches that other feet have worn away. Science may be right; heaven may be a fable, but at least there is a hell. I know it, for I have found it in a woman's arms.

That is what Nigil Stanyon tells his friend, Loftus Roupell, one of those youthful cynics who are always introduced into your modern problem play for spectacular rather than for a utilitarian purpose. Nigil has met a lovely creature, known rather soubrettishly as Belle. They "kept house" together abroad in the good old "Mrs. Tangueray" style, and she loved him fervidly, as long as his money lasted—a condition of things that is not altogether novel. As soon as his final penny had been investigated, she packs up her toothbrush and her best bonnet and leaves him without even saying a farewell "Tra-la-la."

Belle is thus introduced as a lady who sends gentlemen's souls to perdition in a very ruthless way. It is usually the man who gets tired and runs away. But in "The Tree of Knowledge" it is the woman. In real life it is frequently the woman, but playwrights are generally men, and subscribe to the laws of gallantry that makes every woman a martyr and every man a demon.

Nigil, however, is inclined to be sumptuously good. Men generally are, when they have sown their wild oats. He falls raptly in love with his ward, Miss Monica Blayne, but is haunted by the recollections of his past. And this induces the cynic to remark: "You treat your past like a child does the seed it has planted the day before—you dig it up again to see how it is getting on."

The action of "The Tree of Knowledge," however, begins with the arrival of Belle as the newly made wife of Nigil's dearest friend, Sir Mostyn Hollingworth. He has married her clandestinely, and begs Nigil to break the news to his father. Belle is one of those adventuresses who are addicted to loitering



on sofas in sinuous clothes that display plenty of neck. She is not at all perturbed by the meeting with her old lover. She takes it as a matter of course. The man is naturally horribly astonished, and I have no doubt that if you have been to the theatre once or twice you can arrange on your mental tablets a good picture of the scene.

The play hastens on. Popper Hollingworth does the hastening. He promptly announces that he is ruined, and that his son will, consequently, be left to his own inconsequential resources. The foreclosure of a mortgage—always a valuable stage property—has done it all. Belle is instantly disenchanted with this second gentleman. Lover No. 1 and lover No. 2 both succumb to the disaster of pecuniary difficulty, and there is, of course, but one thing for her to do, and that is to find a lover No. 3, who is more agreeably supplied with the chink-chink of this world.

The third gentleman in Belle's list turns out to be Loftus Roupell, the fashionable cynic, to whom Nigil has "told the story of her past." Roupell is rich and rascally—a combination that is very popular on the stage, when a hero to be a hero must be poverty stricken, and a villain, to live up to the traditions, must be mercifully moneyed. Roupell's friendship for Nigil is no obstacle in the way of his passion. He makes violent love to Belle, and an elopement is planned.

That leads Mr. Carton up to his big scene—one that is voted exceedingly repulsive, but at the same time "strong." Nigil has heard of the elopement scheme, and, having nothing better to do, decides to reason with the adventuress, and save Hollingworth from the shock that her desertion would cause him. He goes to her room, and discovers her in the act of signalling to her lover that the coast is clear. Like Bunthorne, Nigil is very "terrible when thwarted," and the sight of the wanton who has ruined his own life, engaged in similar designs upon that of his friend, goads him to fury. He declares that he will kill her, and seizing her by the throat has started to strangle her, when Hollingworth enters.

Can you imagine the scene? She pursues the tactics of Mrs. Potphar—a saucy lady who has been threatened with impersonation by Mrs. Potter—and tells her husband that Nigil tried to kill her. "Don't let him speak," she says. "He will poison your mind against me, Brian—there has been a shadow between us all these months. I knew it, but I was helpless. I told you some of the truth, but not all. Once I almost confessed. Do you remember?"

"I told you—that before I met you, a thief had stolen from me all that a woman holds most dear. I told you so much but no more. I didn't tell you the name of the man."

"Tell it to me, now," pants Hollingworth.

"I kept it secret in mercy to you," she says.

"Tell me the name."

"Nigil Stanyon," she cries. "There is the thief!"

The "big scene" continues. Nigil cannot explain and he leaves the interesting couple. What seems to be rather cheap and tawdry melodrama creeps in. Mr. Carton is anxious to paint Belle in the blackest colors possible. Even at this issue, there is no remorse, no better nature. The fact that hubby knows all, and yet spurns her not, is not allowed to push aside the black curtains of her nature. She pours some lights into a glass of water and gives it to the dozing gentleman to drink. She makes a comfortable place on the sofa for him, and sings to him by-by. As soon as he is in the land of Nod, she resumes her signalling to her lover, and softly—elopes!

"The best and the worst of us are fools," she says, as she looks at the dormant husband. Mr. Carton gives to her one touch of nature—probably to enhance the gloom of her character. She kisses his forehead, and taking from her neck a gold chain that had belonged to his mother (the mother episode seems like maudlin French) she twines it around his arm and exits.

And in the last act there is peace, and happy marriage for nanby-pamby Nigil. He turns to little Miss Monica and tells her the story of his past—reversing the usual order of things once more in a way that would surely delight the heart of Sarah Grand. He apologizes to her for his rude disclosures, but she seems to positively like them!

"You would put a bandage round a woman's eyes," she says. "I would tear it off and say to her: 'Look at the world as it is, and try to understand it, for knowledge is a better friend to chastity than ignorance can ever be.'"

Nigil protests that there are things a woman need not know, but she disagrees with him. "Trust us," she says. "A wife is only a wife when she is a friend as well—for remember, sympathy, to be worth anything, must follow in the path of knowledge."

"The Tree of Knowledge" has repelled and attracted the critics of London. They deplore its brutality, but they acknowledge its strength and its interest. But one or two of them gloat over the idea of the woman getting her innings in the game of human relationship. Of course, woman's malevolent influence—when she cares to exert it—is the very oldest theme in the world, but the spick-and-span laws of gallantry—made by men—have of late placed the sinning woman on a sort of pinnacle of sympathy, and placed all the guilt on the shoulders of the man.

I should say that in "The Tree of Knowledge" the vacillating, weak-blooded Nigil would interfere greatly with the value of the play. Gentlemen who turn good suddenly, apropos of nothing at all, are not at all popular in this community. The tradition that gives a man's past into his own keeping is one of the few traditions that we need not deplore. It is a good tradition, and no purpose is to be gained by its disturbance. Nigil's qualms and fears appear to me to be slightly unnatural. Men ought to have them—but they don't.

Belle herself appears to be too detestable to serve the purpose of pointing any moral. That is the trouble with playwrights. They rush to extremes. Will any audience calmly sit and listen to the cynical outpourings of a woman who has three men attached to her apron-strings? That question is being asked in London, and the success of "The Tree of Knowledge" depends absolutely upon its satisfactory solution. There is no reason why a woman shouldn't be pilloried as well as man, but such an exaggerated type as Belle would seem to be straining a little far for the ignominious effect.

The woman who sends men's souls to perdition is capable of being dramatized. Man has sinned for so long that there is no reason why he shouldn't be pictured as a martyr occasionally, but this picture is made with very brutal lines in "The Tree of Knowledge." This feminine libertine is painted in colors cruder than those used for the masculine type. There is no harm in introducing us to the destroying woman—for we are tired to death of the destroying man—but Belle is such an excessively destructive person that no public need be blamed for rebelling at her presence.

I could imagine what New York would say to hear her. I can hear the comments uttered by each respectable critic. Some of them would say that it was merely spiteful rubbish. They would say this in an effort not to "advertise" the play by calling it immoral. But if "The Tree of Knowledge" is staged here nobody can afford to dismiss it as rubbish. Oppressive, repulsive it may be, but rubbish—never.

ALAN DALE.

"The Woman, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat."